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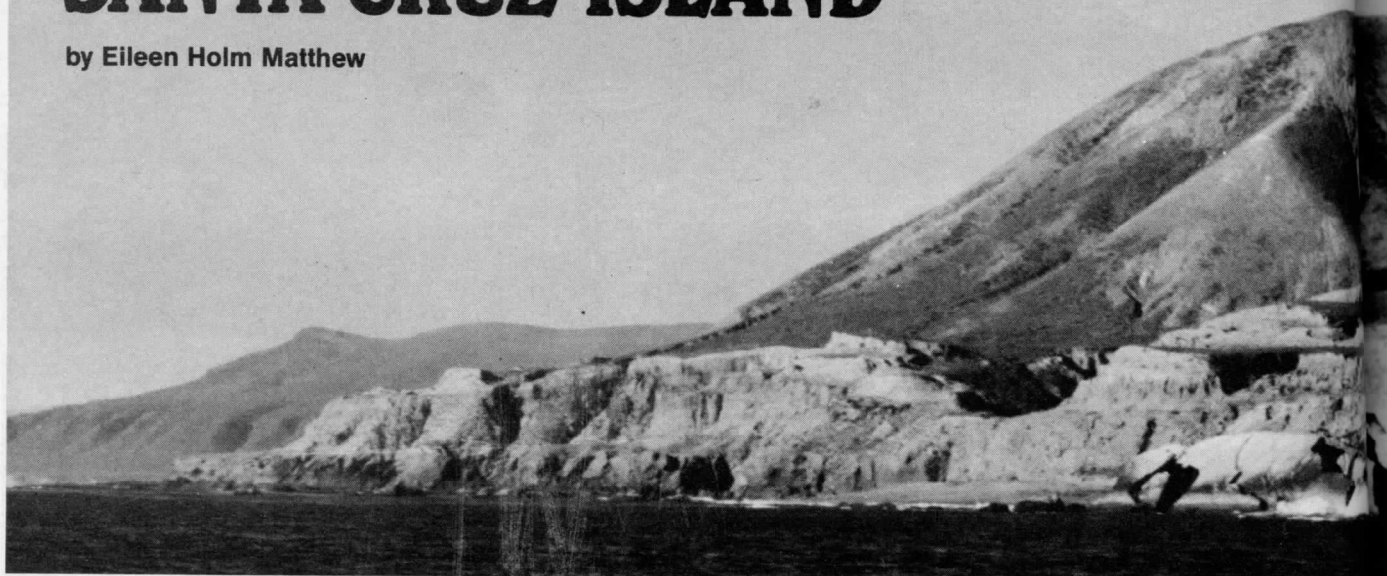
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Off-Season Cruising SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

by Eileen Holm Matthew



Winter is a crisp time at Santa Cruz. It offers some of the clearest weather of the year. Lying at anchor on the north side of the island, you can see the mountains behind the mountains of Santa Barbara. The days are short. The night sky shines like diamonds on black velvet. Winter is a cozy time in snug cabins, a time for candlelight dinners, stereo tapes and card games by flickering kerosene lamps.

Spring brings life anew to Santa Cruz Island. Hills are covered with green shag carpet and sunny banks explode with wildflowers. Canyon streams which trickle in summer, bounce off rocks and tumble over falls. Wildlife is abundant, new lambs dot the hillsides, and the days grow longer once again. The biggest problem with cruising Santa Cruz off-season is deciding which season is the nicest time to be there.

If you've visited Santa Cruz in summer, you'll know that there are no boating facilities of any kind at the island. Also, since there are fewer visiting boats to lend a hand, yachts must be provisioned with plenty of food, water, fuel, ice and medical supplies, and be equipped for self-sufficient cruising.

We carry tools and spare parts, repair manuals for everything on board, and full safety gear of the ocean-racing type including a VHF radio, an RDF, a depth finder, safety harnesses, a storm jib and a life raft.

A dinghy is a necessity if you want to go ashore. A sailing dinghy is especially fun because there usually is plenty of wind for sailing in the wave-sheltered coves. Don't forget your cockpit awning, as you may welcome the shade from the midday sun.

A taffrail barbecue is nice to have, since no fires are permitted on the island. We have a CB on board plus a walkie-talkie to keep in touch with our shore parties or dinghy sailors.

If you plan to go ashore, get your permits in advance as nothing can be issued at the island. The area from Coche Point clockwise to Sandstone Point is owned by the Gherini family. You can get a permit to land here by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Pier Gherini, 1114 State St., Suite 230, Santa Barbara, CA 93101. The rest of the island is owned by Dr. Carey Stanton, and landing permits may be obtained from the Santa Cruz Island Co., 515 S. Flower St., Los Angeles, CA 90071.

Although local boats visit the island every month of the year, an understanding of off-season weather conditions is vital because there are no fully sheltered harbors at Santa Cruz. The season from October to May gives some of the finest boating weather anywhere, but three types of storm conditions also may occur at this time.

Southeasterly storms often bring heavy rains, strong winds and big seas. If you're caught at the island, remember that the entire shoreline of Santa Barbara County becomes a lee shore, and that entering Santa Barbara Harbor may become impossible. It's important to monitor weather and harbor conditions by radio and to leave early to seek shelter before the storm has a chance to become dangerous.

Fierce northwest winds sometimes develop with and just after cold fronts. These fronts (boundaries between warm and cool air masses) may be characterized by dense

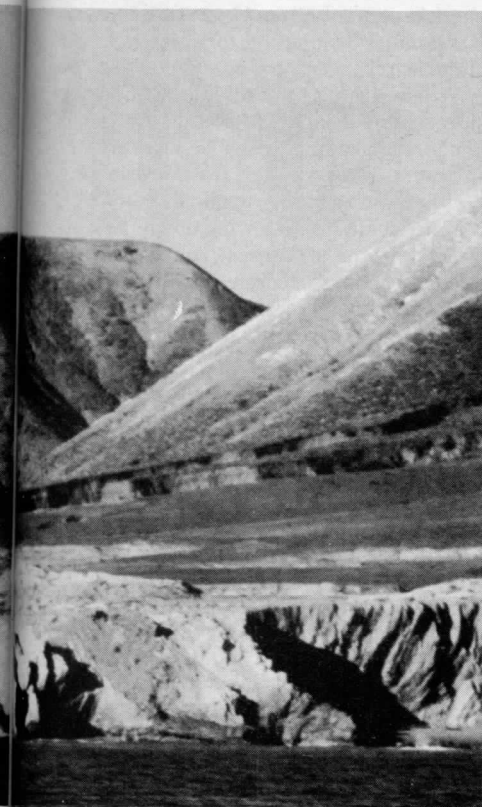
cloudiness and heavy rains, or they may bring just a few clouds and showers—which are not likely to warn the inexperienced boatman of impending rough weather. With the passing of the front, north to northwest winds can build up to velocities of 20 to 40 knots or more, bringing dangerously high seas as well. You can usually avoid northwest blows by listening to the marine weather forecast for the coast north of Point Conception, and by ducking into Santa Barbara, Ventura or Channel Islands before the storm reaches the Santa Barbara Channel.

Also, after the passing of a northerly, the wind may move into the northeast as Santana conditions develop.

The difficulty with all three types of storms is that shelter may be impossible to find, because wind and seas tend to bend around the island, making almost every anchorage a lee shore. This is less likely to happen under moderate conditions, but it must be expected during severe storms. Therefore, experienced Santa Cruz visitors never depart for the island when bad weather is predicted, and they leave for the mainland immediately when they suspect a storm is brewing.

The Santana is probably the most troublesome of the off-season storms because it tends to occur during fine weather and its severity is rarely predicted. Fortunately, the dangers of the Santana may often be avoided at Santa Cruz. A weird, lumpy swell from the east normally precedes the wind and you can roughly gauge the strength of the wind from the size of the swell.

As soon as you get big seas from the east, leave your anchorage.



Elyse Mintey

Sail for Santa Barbara if you can, or edge towards Gaviota if you must, in order to sail a comfortable course. Santana winds usually diminish toward the western end of the channel. They also tend to decrease or disappear between midchannel and the mainland. If you're blown west of Santa Barbara, you can probably work your way back to the harbor once you're across the channel. If not, just anchor offshore. You'll be safe with the wind blowing off the land. If you must weather a Santana at Santa Cruz, the safest place is probably the west coast between Gull Island and Forney's Cove. Most of this area has a sandy bottom. Try to pick a spot out from a cliff, rather than below a canyon.

Since there are no yacht moorings at the island, it pays to carry heavier than usual ground tackle. Most of the time at Santa Cruz you'll be anchoring in 20 to 30 feet of water over a sandy bottom. If you go in at high tide, be careful to anchor well out from the low tide breaker line. Bow and stern anchors are routinely put out, to hold the bow outward into the swell. Be particularly careful, off-season, to set both anchors firmly under power, to use plenty of scope, and to protect your rode with chafing gear. We carry at least four 350-ft. rodes with thimbles spliced into both ends so that two can be shackled together if we need them. We also pack two buoys to secure to our anchor rodes if we have to cast off in a hurry and leave them behind. We have two spare anchors-with-rodes on board so that we'll never be without ground tackle.

One more tip on island weather, gained from our local fisherman. If you are on the mainland on a clear day, looking across the

channel, and you can see a string of white, puffy clouds over Santa Cruz, it means that there is wind out at the island. The clouds may extend all the way from San Miguel Island over Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands, and down over Anacapa Island as well. The farther they extend, we're told, the stronger the wind. This tip-off can be particularly helpful when you're setting out from Santa Barbara in a dead calm, because you'll know to get battened down and break out foul weather gear before you reach "windy lane." Windy lane, of course, is the island portion of the channel that is out past the wind shadow caused by Pt. Conception.

Although weather problems must be understood and prepared for, remember that there are not many severe storms each year and that the months from October to May at Santa Cruz present some of the finest boating weather available anywhere.

You'll find lots of things to do at Santa Cruz that are more fun off-season than in the summertime. Night skies are frequently clear for star-watching, or sextant practice. You can "shoot" the horizon all night, because of the loom of Santa Barbara. Scuba diving is especially productive this time of year. Both lobster and abalone may be taken during most of these months, as well as the crabs, rock scallops and fish that may be caught all year. The best hunting, as you might expect, is seldom near the heavily used anchorages. The clearest water is off rocks and cliffs, away from coves which have canyons and streams.

Fishing from the dinghy is fun, also. Look for rockfish and kelp bass around kelp beds and rocky areas. And many times, with little effort, we have made a catch of good-sized black perch by fishing right off our boat with mussels pulled off the dock at home and carried in a bucket. Our best luck has been early in the morning, on a rising tide.

Each anchorage at Santa Cruz has a personality of its own. Many are especially appealing off-season. Fry's Harbor is said to be the sunniest cove on the island. It can be snug and clear in Fry's when it's cold and foggy outside. Boats in Fry's generally lie bow-to-beach, to be comfortable in the wind which sometimes blows down the canyon.

Two coves to the east of Fry's you'll find a waterfall which is lovely after a heavy rain. There is a cave in this cove, also, but it is not as large as the one about 300 yards west of Fry's. On shore there is a rock quarry which supplied the material for the breakwater at Santa Barbara.

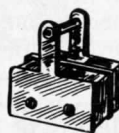
Lady's is the next good harbor east of Fry's. It features two coves with canyons. The best anchorage is in the western cove, and the smaller one to the east, called Little Lady's, should probably be avoided off-season. There is no prettier place to be in springtime, when wildflowers fill both canyons.

Don't forget your camera. The canyon

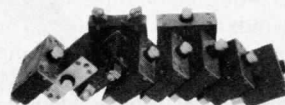
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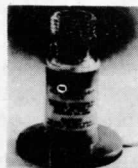


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behind the smaller cove is famous for its natural rock "bath tubs," filled with fresh-water warmed by the sun. You can row over in your dinghy, stopping to see a cave on the way.

Twin Harbors, like Lady's, is a pretty, small anchorage which may be suitable for off-season use. Here it is the cove to the east that is more protected. You can't miss Twin Harbors because of the striking arch rock between the two coves. Although there is no water on shore, the canyon is well worth exploring.

Pelican Bay, about a mile east of Twin Harbors, is considered by many boatmen to be Santa Cruz Island's most secure anchorage. It is large and easy to enter, and since it is protected on three sides by cliffs, canyon winds are not a problem. The usual "best position" is thought to be near the western cliff, but we prefer to anchor on the eastern side of Pelican when days are short to keep the sun longer in the afternoon.

Potato Bay is open to the prevailing westerly, but it is a favorite with some local cruisers for light southeasterly or Santana conditions. The entrance is narrow compared to the bay inside. Potato is protected by sheer cliffs which tend to make it a warm anchorage. There are caves to explore by dinghy, and barking seals on the rocks to the west of the entrance.

Little Scorpion is a popular off-season anchorage because it catches the first rays

of the rising sun to warm the boat in the morning. Two bird-covered rocks connected by a reef give protection to the west and northwest. We enjoy watching the brown pelican colony here. We drop our bow anchor close to the inner rock, then fall back to set our stern hook being careful to keep out from the kelp bed near shore. Don't miss the spectacular view from the top of the hill or the cave in the cliff opposite the bird rocks which is large enough to enter by dinghy.


Albert's is one of the most secure anchorages on the back side of the island. This shore tends to be more exposed and rolly than the north side, because it faces the ocean rather than the Santa Barbara Channel. It would seem that the south shore would be safe from Santana winds. Unfortunately, this is not the case under severe conditions when wind and seas bend around Santa Cruz. Don't anchor too close to the face of the rock that separates Albert's from Coches Prietos. The wave reflection effect can be unpleasant at certain tides.

Coches Prietos keeps the sun longer than Albert's, and it has a warmer and more open feeling. Use special care in anchoring since a surge may develop at night. A white sand beach borders Coches. You may find figs on the trees near the beach. There's a stream ashore, and a marsh, and a road leading to the interior of the island. Coches is the favorite an-

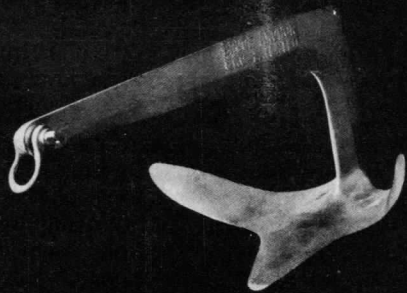
chorage of many Santa Cruz visitors, and it is a popular destination for summer yacht club cruises.

Willows is near the middle of the back side of the island. It is the last good anchorage heading west. The high bluff to the west gives shelter from prevailing weather, but in strong winds the direction may alternate from blowing down the canyon to blowing off the sea. You'll want two adequate hooks securely set. It's easy to land your dinghy on the beach. The shore, which is dry and barren in summer, seems enchanting in early spring.

Forney's Cove, at the northwestern end of Santa Cruz, gives you the last rays of the sun in the afternoon. This cove is protected by a reef which breaks the westerly swell. The reef becomes a lee shore when the wind shifts to the north or northeast, however, and more than one boat has been lost here. We anchor to the southwest, past the reef, except in summer. The land near Forney's is flatter and lower than most of the island. It is one of the best places for hiking and exploring ashore.

All of the Santa Cruz shoreline can be enjoyed the year around. Many of the anchorages not described here are suitable much of the time. We've skipped old standbys like Prisoners, Chinese, Smugglers, Yellowbanks and Valdez because they are more open than our favorite off-season coves. But wherever you go in any season, you'll love Santa Cruz Island. 

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